

COMMUNICATING WITH YAKS: SHOUTS AND WHISTLES

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ABSTRACT

Tibetan herders have a close relationship with livestock, which gives them a rich knowledge of livestock, especially yaks. This article introduces fundamental and broad categories of yaks and how Tibetan herders use both shouts and whistles to herd, drive, and communicate with yaks. This paper is an initial effort to document these unique languages of sounds that communicate across species, focusing on the Upper Gtsang lha sde Community in Gtsang a rig - a sub-tribe of the A rig Tribe, officially known as Ska chung (Gaun) Community, located in Nyin mtha' (Ningmute) Township, Hi nan (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

KEYWORDS

cross-species communication, nomads, Tibetan herders, Tibetan livestock calls, whistles, yaks

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Person A says to Person B, "*G.yag de kha zig chog ra* 'Shout to that *g.yag*'/'Please shout to frighten that *g.yag*'" Person B then shouts "*re re!*" and throws a stone to frighten away the yak.

My name is Phun tshogs dbang rgyal and I am a Tibetan from a herding area on the Eastern Tibetan Plateau. More specifically, I am a member of the Upper Gtsang lha sde Community in Gtsang a rig - a sub-unit of the A rig Tribe - that is officially Ska chung (Gaqun) Community, which is located in Nyin mtha' (Ningmute) Township, Hinnan (Henan) Mongolian Autonomous County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sgnon (Qinghai) Province, PR China.

People in my home place have a close relationship with yaks, sheep, and horses, which I grew up herding. There are hundreds of systematic terminologies to categorize yaks in oral Tibetan. Most of these terms are not being documented. With accelerating globalization, these cultures and their terms are quickly vanishing. I now introduce a small part of yak terminology and how people in my home place communicate with yaks using shouts and whistles.

The English term "yak" is from the Tibetan term *g.yag*, which can be a general term for yaks, ignoring the females. The actual general term for yaks is *nor* or *zog*. However, *g.yag* specifically refers to male adult yaks that are culturally understood to be castrated. Uncastrated yaks are *khyu g.yag* or *bu hwa*. The term for female adult yaks is '*bri*. Another important group of yaks is the offspring of a mother '*bri* and a father bull. The males of hybrids are *mdzo*, and the females are *mdzo mo*.

Tibetan nomads have terms for yaks of different ages, genders, colors, with or without horns, and horn shapes. There are also specific terms indicating if a '*bri* has given birth for the first time, gives birth every other year, or if the '*bri* does not give birth at all.

Tibetan herders make different sounds to drive or frighten different yaks. For *g.yag* we make the sound *rere*, for '*bri* we make the sound *go go* to drive them, for *mdzo* and *mdzo mo* we say *dzo dzo*, and we use the sounds *dirrrr* or *thirrrr* to frighten away calves. For example, if a yak is leading a herd into another territory, the herder calls *re re*

while throwing rocks to drive the lead yak in another direction. The herd then follows the lead yak.

Tibetan herders use at least three whistling sounds to drive yaks and sheep:

- h+pho ~ h+pho - whistling with the lips
- hri ~ hri - whistling with the teeth and the top of the tongue
- bahri ~ bahri - whistling using the lips, teeth, and tongue

For sheep, gentler whistling such as *hri* ~ is used.

For yaks, harsher whistling sounds at a higher pitch are used, such as *hri* ~ *hrid*. Whistling is used mostly when driving the herd or the flock when they are near or in front of the herder or herders.

TIBETAN TERMS

'bri འབྲི། a female yak

a mdo ཨ་མདོ། a traditional Tibetan region

bu hwa བུ་ཧྲ། a synonym for bull yaks

g.yag གཡག། a male yak

g.yag de kha zig chog ra གཡག་དེ་ཁ་ཟིག་ཆོག་ར། shout to that *g.yag*/please
shout to frighten that *g.yag*

gtsang a rig གཙང་འ་རིག། a Tibetan sub-tribe of the A rig Tribe

gtsang lha sde གཙང་ལ་སྡེ། a community

hi nan ཧི་ནན། a county

khyu g.yag ཁྱུ་གཡག། a bull yak

mdzo མདོ། a male yak hybrid

mdzo mo མདོ་མོ། a female hybrid of a yak

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན། a province

nor འོར། general term for yaks

nyin mtha' ཉིན་མཐའ། a township

phun tshogs dbang rgyal ཕུན་ཚོགས་དབང་རྒྱལ། a person's name

rma lho ལྷོ་རྩོ། a prefecture

ska chung སྐ་ཚུང། a community

zog ཚོག་ one of the general terms for yak

CHINESE TERMS

Gaqun 尕群 Herding Community

Henan 河南 County

Huangnan 黄南 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Ningmute 宁木特 Township

Qinghai 青海 Province

ONOMATOPOEIA

bahri ~ bahri བཞི་ ~ བཞི།

dirrr, dIr དྲྀར་”

dzo dzo རྩོ་རྩོ།

go go གོ་གོ།

hri ~ ཞི་ ~

hri ~ hri ཞི་ ~ ཞི།

hri ~ hrid ཞི་ ~ ཞིད།

h+pho ~ h+pho མོ་ ~ མོ།

re re རེ་རེ།

thirrr, thIr ཐྲྀར་”